

RE-ENTRY POLICY STUDY COMMISSION

WHAT IS RECIDIVISM?

A working definition

Recidivism, in the context of criminal behavior, commonly refers to the re-arrest, the re-conviction, or the re-incarceration of ex-offenders. It is often considered the critical outcome variable in determining if an ex-offender has been successful or has failed in his or her return to the community.

Assessing recidivism can present a very complex measurement problem depending on definitions used. For example recidivism, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics “is measured by criminal acts that resulted in the re-arrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following the prisoner’s release.” Some define recidivism as re-admission to prison, while others define it as conviction of a new crime, whether or not it involved return to incarceration; still others define recidivism as arrests for a new crime, or even a technical violation of release conditions, regardless of outcome.

In a practical sense, recidivism can be defined as an event whereby an ex-offender lapses into a previous pattern of anti-social behavior, especially a pattern of habitual criminal behavior which conflicts with the goals and objectives established by the system to assist him or her in becoming a law abiding member of the community. To the degree that former offenders desist from criminal activity, victimization is reduced and public safety is increased.

In order to reduce recidivism, regardless of definition, it is essential that we promote opportunities that are research-based and proven to work to change behavior and reduce the likelihood of a participant’s return to criminal activity, whether or not it results in return to custody. These opportunities must be present within all areas of our community including, but not limited to, our criminal justice system, our treatment community, our business community, our faith based community and our educational community.

These opportunities must be in the form of creative and productive programs and activities. These include cognitive-behavioral programs that address anti-social and criminal thinking, behavior and motivation, addiction treatment, education, technical training, problem solving, social and life skills as well as mental health counseling. Interventions need to be based on individual risks and needs indicated through the use of valid assessment instruments.